



from a bayān given at:

The Islamic Study Center
Charlottesville,, Virginia

2012/1432

by

Shaykh A. Nooruddeen Durkee



فَضْرِبَ بَيْنَهُمُ سُورًا مِّنْهُ بَابٌ يُدْخِلُ فِيهِ الرَّحْمَتَ وَظَاهِرٌ مِّنْ قِبَلِهِ الْعَذَابُ

faḍuriba baynahum bi sūril-lahu bābun bāṭinuhu
fihi -r-raḥmatu wa ḍḡāhiruhu min qibalihi-l-°adhābā

And a wall will be erected between them with a gate in it,
on the inside of which there will be mercy, outside of it torment.
(Sūratu-l-Hadid 57:13)



©

2011/1432

Shaykh A. Nooruddeen Durkee
Green Mountain School
GreenMountainSchool.Org
e-mail: 313sand313@gmail.com



WHAT?

Taşawwuf (تصوّف) is defined by its adherents as the inner, mystical dimension of °Islām. The Shādhḍhulī Shāykh Ahmed Zarruq defined Taşawwuf as “A science whose objective is the reparation of the heart and turning it away from all else other than Allāh ﷻ.” The Darqawī Sufi teacher, Aḥmad ibn °Ajiba, said it was, “A science through which one can know how to travel into the presence of the Divine, purify one's inner self from filth, and beautify it with a variety of praiseworthy traits.” A latter Shādhḍhulī shāykh, Sidi °Abdul-Wahid Yaḥya, said that Taşawwuf is the esoteric aspect of °Islām supported and complemented by exoteric practices and Islamic law.

In the realm of early first and second century °Islām, in °Ismalā°ili understanding (before the later complications rising from the self declared qiyama of Ḥasan II), taşawwuf or tariqah was the second of seven levels on the spiritual path leading to the truth of one's being in the ultimate form of the inner guide who is the man of light or the Eternal Internal Qa°im, the Hidden °Imām and the Saḥibu-z-Zaman, upon whom be peace.

This understanding partially was derived from the °āyāt:

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي أَحْسَنِ تَقْوِيمٍ • ثُمَّ رَدَدْنَاهُ أَسْفَلَ سَافِلِينَ

laqadā khālaqna-l-°insāna fī °āhsani taqāwīm
thumma radadnāhu °āsfala sṣfilīn

We created the human being in the best of forms

Then reduced him to the lowest of the low.

(Sūratu-ṭ-Ṭīn 95:8-9)

Now this juxtaposition of very differing outlooks from differing times may strike the reader as strange (*gharīb*/غريب or °*ajīb*/عجيب), but over the course of this talk we hope this strangeness and wonderousness will permeate the understanding of those who hear or read these words, and, more than that we hope that those who read or hear these words will be inspired to seek their own internal guide, which is at the heart of all beings consonant with the ḥadīth,

Nothing in the heavens and the earth can contain Me,
but the heart of a true believer.”

(Ḥadīth Qudsi).

What?

This way of thinking stems from the understanding that the ḡhāhir or the outer without the batin or the inner is not complete; each human being is a part of a purposeful sacred history, imbued with Divine purpose that is exalted, moving upwards to its origin, and it is that upward movement that the science of taṣawwuf facilitates.

In a wider sense, “batin” can refer to the inner meaning or reality that lies or within behind all existence, whereas the “ḡhāhir” is the world of form and apparent meaning. Additionally there are those who believe that the bāṭin can only be fully understood and interpreted by a figure imbued with esoteric knowledge; a knowledge we hold that ultimately derives from the Prophet ﷺ by way of understanding the function of his inheritor (wātith/وارث), Sayidina °Ali ؑ in accord with the saying of the Prophet ﷺ,

°ana madīnatu-l-°ilm wa °alīyu bābuhā

I am the City of Knowledge and °Alī is it's door

(recorded by at-Tirmidhī and al-Ḥakīm. as-Suyuti says this Ḥadīth is Ḥasan)

and the Qur°ānic ayat

وَأْتُوا الْبُيُوتَ مِنْ أَبْوَابِهَا

wa°tū-l-buyūta min °abwābihā

so enter the house by its door

(Suratu-l-Baqarah 2:189)



Putting together these statements we can understand that, whilst the Prophet ﷺ laid the foundations and built the house (dar) of °Islām, °Alī ؑ and his inheritors explain what is going on inside the house.

انظُرُوا نَافِثِينَ مِنْ تَحْتِ كُرْسِيِّكَ أَوْ رَأَوْا كُفْرًا لَمْ يَسُوا أَنْ يَرَوْا قَضِيبَ
بَيْنِهِمْ رَسُولٌ بَابٌ بَاطِنُهُ فِئْدَةُ الرَّحْمَةِ وَظَاهِرُهُ مِنْ قِبَلِهِ الْعَذَابُ

°undḡhurūnā naqātabis min nūrikum qīla °irji°ū wa rā°akum
fā-°iltamisū nūran faḡuriba baynahum bi sūril-lahu bābun bāṭinuhu
fihi -r-raḡmatu wa ḡhāhiruhu min qibalihi-l-°adhābā

“Wait for us so that we can borrow some of your light.”

They will be told, “Go back and look for light!”

And a wall will be erected between them with a gate in it,
on the inside of which there will be mercy – outside of it torment.

(Sūratu-l-Ḥadīd 57:13)

What?

There are many people who do not understand exactly what ʿAlī ؑ was doing during the years when the khulafāʾ Abi Bakr, ʿUmār and Uthmān ؓ were occupied in the consolidation and expansion of the nascent Muslim community. It was precisely during those 24 years that taṣawwuf had its origins and development in and through the teachings of Alī ؑ who was providentially granted those years to set the basis for this science. Those people who vilify (*tabarraḥ*) the khulafāʾ have no understanding of the metaphysical and spiritual necessity for the khulafāʾ, not to mention the social and political ramifications of what those three men ؓ accomplished.

People often forget that ʿAlī ؑ was granted only a few short years as the Leader of the Faithful and most of that time was taken up by the fitnah of the wars precipitated by the assassination of Uthmān ؓ and all that followed by way of the battles of the Camel, Siffin and with the Kharijites at Nahrawan, and finally his assassination as he prepared for morning prayers on the 19th of Ramaḍān in the city of Kufa (al-ʿIraq) and his subsequent death a few days later on the 28th of February in 661 or the 21st of Ramaḍān in 40 A.H.

With that shortness of time and the difficulties brought about by open conflict in mind it is of the utmost importance that we understand the blessings of those twenty four years in which he ؑ was left blessedly free to teach, advise and develop what we, his inheritors, from then to now, impart of his teachings based as they were on the Qurʾān and his direct observation of the life and the ways at the most intimate levels of the Holy Prophet ﷺ.

For although Abu Bakr ؓ was his dear friend, and ʿUmar ؓ his strong right arm, and Uthmān ؓ his financial support it was, when all is said and done, Alī ؑ who stood up for him ﷺ when none would, who lived his life on a daily and intimate minute by minute basis with the Prophet ﷺ, who married his beloved daughter Fāṭimah az-Zahrāʾ (فاطمة الزهراء) ؑ, and who brought him his beloved grandsons, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn ؑ and his brave and courageous granddaughter Zaynab ؑ who spoke truth to power.

Recall his teachings as the leader of the community in these words, “Infuse your heart with mercy, love and kindness for your subjects. Be not in the face of them a voracious animal, counting them as easy prey, for they are of two kinds: either they are your brothers in religion or your equals in creation.

What?

“Error catches them unaware, deficiencies overcome them, (evil deeds) are committed by them intentionally and by mistake. So grant them your pardon and your forgiveness to the same extent that you hope Allāh ﷻ will grant you His pardon and His forgiveness. For you are above them, and he who appointed you is above you, and Allāh ﷻ is above him who appointed you. Allāh ﷻ has sought from you the fulfillment of their requirements and He is trying you with them.”

Is it not he ﷺ, the shaykh of all shuyukh who fulfilled the sunnah of mercy toward all by which Allāh ﷻ sent the Prophet ﷺ to us?

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

wa mää °arsalnākāā °illā-rahmatal-li-l-°ālamīn

And We have not sent you except as a Mercy for all the worlds.

(Sūratu-l-°Ambiyā° 21:107)



Taşawwuf is in its beginning and in its end about becoming that which you truly are by dint of Allāh ﷻ having created you in the best of forms; of His creating you on the perfect fitrah of being.

The Prophet ﷺ was created as a prophet ﷺ in accord with his saying, “I was prophet before Adam was between water and clay.” And before the beginning of creation by a million years the Prophet ﷺ stood before Allāh ﷻ in worship and there was unveiled to him the Mystery Itself “at the Lote Tree of the Boundary” (*sidratu-l-muntahā*/سِدْرَةُ الْمُنْتَهَى) (Sūratu-n-Najm 53:14), which is the tree standing at the boundary where the knowledge of everyone comes to an end. Muḥammad ﷺ was a lamp from the light of the Invisible ...a moon radiating among the moons, whose mansion is in the sphere of mysteries; the lights of prophethood – from his light shone forth, and their lights appeared from his light, and there is no light among the lights more luminous and more visible and previous to pre-existence, than the light of this noble one. And all of this, all of it, was the free gift of Allāh ﷻ who simply wished to be known.

But °Alī ؑ is the figure *par excellence* for all those who yearn and aspire because it fell to him to make himself as we who aspire to the Truth must in turn make our selves. This is not given but won.

That is a simple statement but the branches of its meaning are vast and reach from then until now.

What?

Sayyidinā Alī ؑ when asked said that he was not taught but rather was fed knowledge by the Prophet ﷺ.

This is the Alī ؑ, who in his oral teachings explains the construct of earth saying that “the continents are masses of land floating on the ocean and held in place by mountains acting as pegs.’ This knowledge was passed to us by Alī ؑ who claims that he learned all he knew from the Prophet ﷺ. Also note that Alī ؑ explained this construct of the earth some 1400 years ago, while less then 400 years ago, people in Europe disputed about the shape of the earth declaring it to be flat and stationary, fixed and unmoving, and people were executed by the church for saying otherwise while this same knowledge of the continental plates and drift was only discovered 75 years ago by Western scientists.

This is the same Alī ؑ who, in his sermons in the last days of his life, announced to the people, “Ask me before I leave you, and I may tell you all. Ask me for I can tell you of the paths of the heavens more then the path of the earth.”

So when we ask *what* is taṣawwuf it is here we must begin, here with Sayyidinā °Alī ؑ, for although the Prophet ﷺ contained and held all the knowledge it fell to someone to explain its meaning to us and that is the role of the first shaykh ؑ and every other shaykh from then to now and may Allāh sanctify their secret.

Allāh ﷻ is the Lord-Sustainer of the whole universe, the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists. Muḥammad ﷺ is His Messenger and a source of *raḥmah* for the whole universe. Alī ؑ is the greatest sign of the miraculous powers of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ.

Alī ؑ is the prince (°āmīr/أمير) of all the saints (al-°awliyā°/الأولياء) and the leader of all the Ṣūfīs who are all under his command. From him stems the chains (salāsīl/سلاسل) of the fourteen holy families and the seven orders. He ؑ is the spiritual ruler of the inner worlds. For all the people of the earth, he is the fountainhead of Peace and Protection for both the inner and the outer life. He ؑ is the *Qutb Madar*, which means that the administration of all affairs spiritual and temporal depends upon him. He is the *Ghawth ath-Thaqalayn*, which means that he responds to the cries for help coming from the inhabitants of both the worlds. Whilst others may hold worldly office it is he who presides over the *ḥukumu-l-baṭaniyah* or the invisible government of this world and it is he who is the shaykh of all of our shaykhs and it is to him all lines of transmission go back.

What?

A *Qutbu-l-Aqtāb* or *Ghawthu-l-°Aḍḥim* (Aḍam) always performs the functions as his deputy in the physical world; three saints are always appointed to the office of Naqba. After their death, the line of succession continues by the appointment of new Naqīb. To this day, this functional spiritual grace of °Imāmu-l-°Awliyā° °Alī ؑ exists in the world and it will continue until the Day of Resurrection. Every Ghawth, Qutb, Naqba, °Awtad, Abrar, °Abdal and Akhyar is performing his administrative duties under the command of °Imām °Alī ؑ and they will continue to be appointed in the future through his grace. (see the essay *Abdal, Awtad, and the Aqtāb* on this subject)

There are those who claim °Alī ؑ is only at the door and there is someone else inside the house but this is to remind those who hold this opinion that the one they claim is inside the house (*dar*) in the end traces his silsilah back through the same °Imām °Alī ؑ who is both at the door, inside the house and, in truth, above the house.

So if we want to ask the question *what* is taṣawwuf we must begin really by understanding who it is whose hand was with and in the hand of the Prophet ﷺ from the beginning and

يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ ؕ

yadu-llāhi fawqa °aydīhim.

The Hand of Allāh is above their hands.

(Sūratu-l-Faṭḥ 48:10)



For those people who might think that this essay is really only Shi°a polemics I would like you to know and deeply understand that such distinctions are disinformation. In reality there is no such thing as a Sunni Shi°a divide but rather it more useful to understand that there are those who follow Yazīd, and among them are both Sunnis and Shi°a. A few among both Sunnis and Shi°a there are those few who follow al-Ḥusayn ؑ, for as Allāh ﷻ says,

فَلَمَّا كُتِبَ عَلَيْهِمُ الْقِتَالُ تَوَلَّوْا إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِّنْهُمْ ؕ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِالظَّالِمِينَ

falamā kutiba °alayhimu-l-qitālu tawallaw °illa qalīlan minhum
wa-llāhu °alīmun bi-ḍḥ-dḥalīmīn

when fighting was decreed for them they turned away,
except for a few of them! — Allāh knows the oppressors.

(Sūrau-l-Baqarah 2:246)

What?

In the battle of Nahrawan ʿImām ʿAli ؑ was fighting like any ordinary soldier. During the battle a man came to fight him man to man and in the encounter lost his sword. He realized his plight standing before ʿImām ʿAli ؑ without any weapon in hand. ʿImām ʿAli's ؑ hand was raised for the final blow when he saw the antagonist trembling with fear. He lowered his hand slowly and said:

“Take leave friend you are in no position to defend yourself.”

This attitude emboldened the man who said:

“Alī! Why don't you kill me? I would be one enemy less for you.”

ʿImām ʿAli ؑ said:

“I cannot strike a man who cannot defend himself. On top of that you were trembling with fear and so I have spared you.”

This emboldened his opponent, who said:

“I am told that you have never refused a beggar. Now I beg you of your sword, will you grant it to me?”

ʿImām ʿAli ؑ handed him over the sword. Taking possession of the sword his opponent said:

“Now ʿAlī, who is going to defend you against me? Who will save you from my killing blow?”

ʿImām ʿAli ؑ said:

“Allāh ؑ of course, He will defend me if He so wills. He has appointed my death to be my guardian angel. None can harm before it is due and none can save me when it arrives.”

The nobility of the thought and action of ʿAli ؑ so moved his foe that he kissed the bridle of the horse of ʿImām ʿAli ؑ and said:

“Oh my lord, you are a great man indeed. You cannot only forsake the life of your enemy in a battlefield but also can grant him your sword. May I have the honor to act as your body guard and to fight for you?” ʿImām ʿAli ؑ replied: “Friend, fight for truth and justice and do not fight for people.”



During the Battle of the Camel in the thick of the encounter one of his servants brought him some sweet syrup, saying:

“My lord the sun is very hot and you have been constantly fighting, have a glass of this cold drink to refresh yourself.”

What?

°Imām °Ali ﷺ looked around and replied:

“Shall I refresh myself when hundreds of people around me are lying wounded and dying of thirst and wounds? Instead of bringing sweet syrup for me take a few men with you and give each of these wounded persons a cool drink.”

The servant replied: “My lord, they are all your enemies”

°Imām °Ali ﷺ said: “They may be but they are human beings so attend to them.”



In the Mathnawī (مثنوی) of Jalāl ad-Dīn Rumī ﷺ, we find a beautiful narration of an incident that traditionally is considered to have taken place at the Battle of Khybar between °Imām °Ali ﷺ and a knight from among the non-believers (*kuffar*).

°Imām °Ali ﷺ had gotten the better of this warrior and was standing over him about to kill him, when the enemy spat in the face of °Alī ﷺ. Quite to the surprise of the knight, °Alī ﷺ sheathed his sword and spared his life.

The knight was astounded by this act and his showing forgiveness and mercy without reason. He said, “You lifted your sword against me: why have you sheathed it and spared me? What did you see that was better than combat with me, so that you turned back from finishing me off?”

As this passage continues, the knight implores °Alī ﷺ to tell him what he has seen, to give the mysterious reason for his pardon. In truth the knight has already undergone a spiritual transformation sparked by the strange action of °Alī ﷺ, and now seeks to understand how the mercy (*rahmah*) of Allāh ﷻ has come upon him:

“Oh °Alī ﷺ, you are all mind and eye, relate a little of that which you have seen!

“The sword of your forbearance has rent my soul, the water of your knowledge has purified my earth. Tell it forth! I know that these are His mysteries, because it *His* work (way) to kill without a sword.

“Your eye has learned to perceive the Unseen, while the eyes of the bystanders are sealed.

“Inasmuch as the moon (even) without speech is showing the way, when it speaks it becomes light upon light.

What?

“Since you are called the Gate of the City of Knowledge ﷺ and since you are as a ray of the Sun of Clemency ﷺ, be open, Oh Gate ﷺ, to him that seeks the gate, so that by means of you the husks may reach the core, the bone may release the marrow.”

Here we should note first that Rumi ﷺ wrote that he spit in the face of °Alī ﷺ when Islamic tradition gives °Alī ﷺ the distinction of the special honorific, “*karram Allahu wajhah*” (may Allāh honor his face).

So the face the knight spat on would be the same countenance the very sight of which would have a transformative power over his soul. Here we may equate the face of °Alī ﷺ with the moon, and the light upon light as the reflected rays of the sun.

The dark night of the covered-over soul (*kafir*) is illumined by the light coming from the moon, but the moon gives off light precisely because it is not in the dark of the night, but is in the presence of the solar rays of the unseen sun, the rays of the Divine Intellect, which it reflects to those who have not yet achieved vision of the Divine sun. The knight admits as much, when he speaks of the moon showing the way without speech.

The unexpected sparing of his life opened the inner eye just enough so that he could see the moon of the face of °Alī ﷺ shining upon him, inciting him to ask him ﷺ what he had seen, just as one who has seen the moon but not the sun would wonder what the source of that magnificent light could be. For the knight, °Alī ﷺ is the unseen light of Allāh ﷻ reflected in this world.

From a state of disbelief or unbelief or covering of the truth (*kufr*), the knight in fact becomes a spiritual seeker, which Rumī represents with the series of question, What have you seen? Tell it forth!

The knight represents the beginning of the path, and °Alī ﷺ represents the end of it:

He said, “I am wielding my sword for the sake of Allāh ﷻ I am the servant of Allāh ﷻ .

“I am not under the command of my body. I am the lion of Allāh ﷻ

“I am not the lion of passion: my deed bears witness to my religion.

“In war I make manifest the truth of, ‘You did not throw when you threw’ referred to in the ʾāyāt:

What?

فَلَمْ تَقْتُلُوهُمْ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ قَتَلَهُمْ ۚ وَمَا رَمَيْتَ إِذْ رَمَيْتَ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ رَمَىٰ

falam taqtulūhum walakinna Allaha qatalahum
wama ramayta ith ramayta walakinna Allaha ramā

You did not kill them; it was Allah who killed them;
and you did not throw, when you threw; it was Allah who threw:
(Sūratu-l-ʿAnfal 8:17)

“I am a sword and the wielder is the Light. I am a shadow, the Light is my Lord, I am the chamberlain, the one who manages the household of the King, the one opens the door not the curtain – the veil which prevents approach to Him

“The sword of my forbearance struck the neck of my anger; the anger of Allāh ﷻ has come on me like Mercy (*raḥmah*).

“I am plunged in Light although my roof is ruined; I have become a garden even though I am called ʿAbū Turāb (Father of Dust).

“Since the thought of something other than Allāh ﷻ intervened, it made me sheathe my sword. That which I am doing for sake of Allāh ﷻ is not fancy and opinion, it is nothing but pure intuition.

“I have been freed from effort and search, I have tied my sleeve to the skirt of Allāh ﷻ.

“If I am flying, I behold the place to which I soar; and if I am circling, I behold the axis on which I revolve;

“And if I am dragging a burden, I know where: I am the moon, and the sun is in front of me as a guide.”

For the *wali*, all activity is according to the will of Allāh ﷻ and for the sake of Allāh ﷻ. The higher self, the lion of Allāh ﷻ, dominates the lower self, the lion of passion. ʿAlī ؑ is shown here as having completely given up his own will to the Will of Allāh ﷻ. This is *faqr*, or the spiritual poverty Ṣūfīs speak of. But poverty in relation to this world and ourselves is plenitude in relation to Heaven and the next world, as we see in the line about the garden and ʿAbū Turāb. When the knight spit in the face of ʿAlī ؑ, the conflict was brought down to the personal level, a level beneath the dignity of ʿAlī ؑ. It seems that Rumi does not interpret this incident as revealing some sort of fault in ʿAlī ؑ which he then moved to correct by withdrawing his sword. Rather he sheathed it, as a result of intuition, as we will see.

What?

He sheathed it because he knew at that very moment exactly what to do. He was the man of his moment. We can see here an illustration of how a spiritual master acts in a way which befuddles the disciple into moving farther along the path. He says to the knight:

“Since I am free, how should anger bind me? Nothing is here but Divine quality. Come in! Come in!”

“Come in! The grace of Allāh ﷻ has made you free, because His mercy takes precedence over over His wrath.

“Come in now, for you have escaped from the peril; once you were a common stone but the Elixir has made you a jewel.”

The last line makes clear the spiritual alchemy, which the master helps the disciple perform. Through his action and not through explicit instruction, °Alī ؑ helps bring the seeker to the truth.

On the surface this passage from the Mathnawī is a prime example of *futuwwah*, of chivalric mercy and generosity on the battlefield. The brave warrior claims no glory for himself; he fights only for his Lord. Any deed performed only with personal ambition in mind will yield no real fruit. But at a more profound level, it is the story of °Alī ؑ as the master and the knight as the murīd. As a result of the intuition upon which the perfect sage acts, he took action to guide him to the truth. From this point of view, °Alī ؑ did not withdraw his sword just so that he might save himself from acting in anger and not for Allāh ﷻ, but he sheathed his sword to save the knight from believing that he was dying for this reason. In this way °Alī ؑ saves both the life, *and*, more to the point, the soul of the knight.



I have recounted this tale from the Mathnawī so that the listener or reader may understand how the ṣhaykh works. In ṭaṣawwuf this is called *tarbiyah* (تربية) or spiritual mentoring or training.

Mawlanā Rumī ؑ also says in another place:

“No one became anyone by himself. No piece of iron became a sword by itself. No confectioner became a master of the art until he became the student of the sweet maker. Rumī was not Rumī until he became the slave of Ṣhams of Tabriz.”

In short in this world there is no science or art, trade or business that a human being has acquired without the teaching of another.

What?

It is the envy and the arrogance of the sensual, blind and the dead hearted eternally unfortunate people which keep them from taking the Way to Allāh ﷻ and making the acquaintance of the Guide.

In the sphere of spiritual (*ruḥānī*) training (*tarbīyyah*) the ṣhaykh's concern and affection are similar to a father's affection in the sphere of worldly training. Truly the spiritual mentor (*murabbi*) has greater affection than even a father. The spiritual mentor executes tasks that even a father is incapable of rendering. He unites the spirit (*ruḥ*) of a human being with Allāh ﷻ. He transforms the human being into an *ʿarif* (one who possesses deep knowledge and insight of the spiritual realm) and a *wasil* (one who has attained the goal of Divine measure). Thus, in this holy process of spiritual training the bond between the two parties – murīd and murād– can never be ‘finished’ irrespective of any high degree the association may have attained.”

Bayazid al-Bastamī ؒ once asked Allāh ﷻ “What is the Way to Union?” and heard the reply, “Quit yourself and you will meet Me.”

What is the deep training (*tarbīyyah*)?

How to get rid of your self (*nafs*)?

Allāh ﷻ bestows honor on the one who bows to another and practices ‘humility’ for the sake of Allāh ﷻ. He who bows down is lifted up. He who is vain falls. The seed germinates only when it has been buried in the earth or when one has lost his sword in the middle of the battle.



So when we ask *what* is ṭaṣawwuf we quickly find ourselves with many other questions and many other answers.

If we reiterate that Ṭaṣawwuf as defined by the Ṣhaḥḥidhulī ṣhaykh Ahmed Zarruq is “a science whose objective is the reparation of the heart and turning it away from all else other than Allāh ﷻ”, or take the definition of the Darqawī Sufi teacher Aḥmad ibn ʿAjība who said it was, “a science through which one can know how to travel into the presence of the Divine, purify one’s inner self from filth, and beautify it with a variety of praiseworthy traits.”

We can say, “Yes! That is all true but that truth leads to the question of who will aid us in turning away from all else other than Allāh ﷻ and how can we purify our self from filth?”

What?

And those questions lead us to the master and the master shows us the way and he himself is but one who has learned the way from the one who knows the way and he who knows the way only knows it by dint of learning from the one who has his hand of the one who has his hand in the hand of the one over whose hand is Allāh ﷻ.

يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ ؕ

yadu-llāhi fawqa °aydīhim.

The Hand of Allāh is above their hands.

(Sūratu-l-Faṭḥ 48:10)

But if we talk about the ‘how’ of things we come back inevitably to the training or mentoring or *tarbiyah* of the seeker. Shaykh °Abu-l-°Abbās al-Mursi ؒ, who was the khalifah of Sidi Abu-l-Ḥasan ash-Shadhḥulī ؒ, is a good example (*mithāl*) of the complete fosterer, educator, nourisher and trainer (*murabbi*). This is how he saw it.

- It was the custom of Sīdī °Abu-l-°Abbās ؒ to thoroughly review and investigate (*tafaqqud*) his *muridīn* in regard to their states (*ahwāl*), their inspirations (°*ilhām*) from Allāh ﷻ and their intuitive insights (*firāsah*) by engaging them in discussion so as to check their understanding and progress. He used to say that the “shuyukḥ should follow up their muridūn”.
- He encouraged his muridūn to give up, reject and finally transcend their own likes and dislikes in favour of the likes and dislikes of Allāh ﷻ in terms of what He has prescribed for us.
- He endeavored to remove from his muridūn any desire to show off or be visible (*aḍḥ-ḍḥuhūr*) either by putting on outer signs in the form of outer clothing or by internal boastfulness as to their imagined degree of asceticism (*zuhd*).
- He directed his muridūn to turn their minds and hearts from the ordinary to the sublime.
- His method married the general and the specific. Thus while he spoke of the overall sickness of the time he also cured each of his students of their specific sickness.

So when we speak of the *what* of taṣawwuf we must bring together at least these three things: the science, the teacher and the training.

What?

The word *tarbīyah* (تربّية) in Arabic is a word that linguistically means increase, growth, and loftiness. Conventionally, *tarbīyah* means the development and training of people in various aspects. The word is commonly used to describe the upbringing of children as the parents provide them with the physical, educational, moral, and spiritual needs to help them grow and become useful parties in the society. From the perspective of *taṣawwuf* it is the training which the student receives from the teacher.

°Imām aṣḥ-Shāṭibī ؒ wrote a letter to Abi °Abdillāh Muḥammad bin °Ubād an-Nafzi ؒ, the *khatīb* of Jami°a al-Qayrawin in the city of Fās and the ṣaykh of the people of *tazkiyah* (purification of the soul) of his day. The letter contained an important question surrounding an issue that arose in Granada and served as a cause of discussion and disagreement amongst the scholars.

The Question from °Imām aṣḥ-Shāṭibī ؒ was,

“Is it incumbent upon the one traversing the spiritual path to Allāh ﷻ to take a ṣaykh of a ṭarīqah and *tarbīyah* and to travel upon his hands? Or is it allowable to take this path by seeking knowledge and taking from the people of knowledge without having a ṣaykh of a ṭarīqah?”

The Answer: There are Two Types of Teachers

“For the one traversing the path towards Allah there are two types of ṣayukh:

- 1) Ṣayukh of Knowledge and those of Ṭarbīyah.
- 2) The Ṣayukh of knowledge (°ilm) do not specify a program of *tarbiyah* and spiritual training.

The Ṣaykh of Ṭarbīyah is not a necessity for every seeker. The one who needs such a ṣaykh is the one who has a limited intellect and disobedient soul. As for the one who possesses an ample intellect and submissive character, then it is not incumbent on him to take such a ṣaykh. However, what *is* an obligation on every seeker is to take a ṣaykh who will teach him and educate him.

Study with a ṣaykh of *tarbīyah* is incumbent upon those with disobedient souls and limited intellects. This is due to the thick veils which cover their souls.

What?

They can not be left alone to raise the veils from their souls without the aide of a ṣhaykh who can train and nurture them. Their likeness is as one who suffers from a delicate ailment that only a physician possessed of insight can cure with a powerful remedy.

As for those who are free from the obligation to take a ṣhaykh of tarbiyah, it is due to their sound intellects and obedient souls. These qualities free them from the need of such a ṣhaykh. Their actions are made sound by the knowledge they have learned and that which they take from the people of knowledge and understanding. This person, by the will of Allāh ﷻ, will reach the goal. Thus, there is no need to fear for him from any harm on his way to Allāh ﷻ.

• Historical Background

The reliance on a ṣhaykh of tarbiyah is something that came from the latter scholars of ṭaṣawwuf, and the reliance on a person of knowledge for one's training was the way of the first from amongst the early scholars. This is apparent from their writings and compilations. For example, the works of al-Muhasibi رحمه الله and 'Abū Ṭalib al-Makī رحمه الله and others show that they did not ascribe to a ṣhaykh of tarbiyah the way the latter one's did. The earlier people of tazkiyah (purification) would mention the fundamentals and branches of knowledge especially Ṣhaykh al-Makī رحمه الله, however, their absence of ascribing to a certain ṣhaykh is a proof that such a ṣhaykh was not incumbent, nor a condition, for those seeking Allāh ﷻ in their time.

• The Way of The First Generations: Knowledge and Brotherhood

And this way of traveling to Allāh ﷻ, this was the program of the majority and represents the way of the salaf and the earlier generations.

This is established by the fact that it has not been transmitted that they used to stick to a ṣhaykh of tarbiyah, submit themselves to him and serve as his apprentice and student. However, theirs was only a time of the acquisition of knowledge and reform by spending time in good companionship and fraternal relations. Due to this, they experienced an amazing development which appeared on their inner and outer states. Thus, they traveled the lands and strove to meet with the friends of Allāh ﷻ ('awliyā'), the scholars and those engrossed in servitude to the Divine.

What?

In the present time things are not quite the same. Shaykh °Abdu-l-Qadr al-Murabit says in one of his talks,

“There is another time when the man of Allāh rises up to fight. When he does he must fight in the way of Allāh (*fī sabīli-llāh*/فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ), not the *jihād* (جهاد) of this or that organisation, or this group or that group, but *jihād* with the banner of Allāh ﷻ and the Rasūl ﷺ. This is *jihād* with victory. All the *jihāds* and struggles of the Arabs in this age have been disaster because they did not raise the banner of the Prophet ﷺ. The day when the Muslims move *fī sabīli-llāh* with this knowledge they will have victory:

"Mā shāa' allāh (ما شاء الله). La quwwata °illa billāh.(لا قوة إلا بالله)"

“What Allāh wills and there is no power save with Allāh”

Then they will have victory.

This will be the victory because it will be what is written all around on every wall of the city:

There is no victor except Allāh (lā ghāliba illa-llāh / لا غالب إلا الله)

“There is no victor except Allāh, This is in your hands. Now you must do it. But this *jihād* is not first with the sword. The *jihād* is first to clean everything.

“There are times in *taṣawwuf* when the *tarbiyah* of the Sufis is ... to clean the heart. The purification of this age is not interior. The purification of this age is to make everything exterior clean.

“To make the behaviour clean, to make the street clean, to make the politeness and manners (°ādab/الأدب) clean. To separate the enemy from the friend. This is the *tarbiyah* of this age. This is the *jihad an-nafs* of this age. It is [to insure] that the market is not *ḥarām* (حَرَام), and that the money is *ḥalāl* (حلال); That the exchange itself is *ḥalāl*. It is that all the worldly (*dunyāwī*/دنيوي) exchanges are made *ḥalāl*.

How can we make the *ḥaḍrah* (حضرة) in a dirty place? Cleanness is everything. Everything about °Islām is water. Before *ṣalāh* (صلاة) there must be *wuḍū'* (وضوء). Before *Ḥaḍrah* there must be the Shari'ah of °Islām, but the people who today say Shari'ah of °Islām, do not want this cleanness.

Why is it not clean? Because they are not doing it with the knowledge of the Will of Allāh (*mā shāa' allāh*)

What?

When they know it is *mā shāʾallāh*, it is not they who are doing it. Then they will not keep saying:

“ʾIslām! ʾIslām! ʾIslām!”

But they will say:

“Allāh! Allāh! Allāh!”

This is the truth of this age. The people who say:

“ʾIslām! ʾIslām! ʾIslām!” cut the throats of the people.

When we say ‘Allāh!’ and fight in the Way of Allāh, we will have victory in the Way of Allāh by the Will of Allāh (*fī sabili-llah* (في سبيل الله), *ʾinshāʾallāh* (إن شاء الله)).”



What is important in these examples is the understanding that in all cases the *shaykh* is a necessity for the seeker but that the need for *tarbiyah* rises from “having a limited intellect and disobedient soul” though time may change how the *tarbiyah* is applied in practice.

Those of “sound intellect and obedient soul” still need a *shaykh* but such a *shaykh* need only be a *shaykh* of ‘ilm or of *barakah*.

We can observe this in our own time where we see not a few *shuyukh*, *alḥamdulillāh*, who work through the transmission of knowledge often in the form of *fiqh* and ‘*adab*, and other *shuyukh*, especially those with large numbers of *muridīn*, who work mainly through the transmission, often at a distance, of *barakah*, though of course all of the *ṭurūq* have their various practices which are, in themselves, a form of *tarbiyah* if not a very vigorous or robust form.

But for the hard core of seekers with limited intellects and disobedient souls (which may describe a great number of us) a rather more muscular form of *tarbiyah* is called for.

To begin with the *murīd* must have implicit faith in his *shaykh* to the extent that he believes that in all the world there is no one to his knowledge who can specifically benefit him more than his *shaykh*. This building of this *trust* usually begins with the *shaykh* assigning the *murīd* certain ‘tasks’, some of which may often seem mundane and the value of which may not be readily apparent to the *murīd*. These ‘tasks’ are, however, a major way in which the *murīd* learns to bring his will into accord with the will of the *shaykh*.

What?

That they are simple or mundane tasks is very much part of how tarbiyah works because with mundane or simple tasks it is fairly easy to “see” where you (as the student) are off the mark and where you are on. Off the mark in the sense of an easily and readily observable imperfect or inadequate outcome of the task at hand.

For instance Ṣhaykh °Abdul Qadir is speaking above about cleanliness. Well cleanliness is a metaphor for many things. Let us suppose the ṣhaykh assigns one the task of cleaning the bathroom in the zawiya. A simple enough job albeit with a certain edge to it especially if, for instance, one is from a certain background where you are used to your mother or your wife cleaning the bathroom.

So after getting over that particular hurdle then the murīd is faced with what exactly does the ṣhaykh mean by clean? Or maybe the question might be, “what is dirty?” or even, “what is dirt?” and then after maybe a month or so of cleaning the bathroom and even getting good at it another awareness begins to dawn on the murīd and he or she begins to wonder, is this cleanliness the ṣhaykh is directing me to within or without? I have cleaned the outer bathroom but what about the inner bathroom of my being?

Bells and lights go off. “Oh now I see. The bathroom was just a metaphor. What the ṣhaykh wants me to do is to clean my self and I can use this job he has set me as a way of checking on how I am doing in terms of the tazkiyat-u-n-nafs or the cleaning of my self.” And usually when those bells go off and the light comes on the ṣhaykh of tarbiyah suddenly intervenes and sets one on to another mundane task like cleaning all the windows in the zawiya which leads in its time to other bells and lights and, in the meantime, someone else is cleaning the bathroom or making sure all the shoes that clutter up the front of the door are neatly stacked in racks and what it that all about? (the wax on/wax off of the *Karate Kid*).

In the terminology of ṭaṣawwūf this conception of implicit faith in the ṣhaykh is known as *wahdat-e-maṭlab* or holding firm.

Without holding firm to one’s ṣhaykh, the act of bay‘ah is meaningless and of no inherent deep and lasting benefit, as compatibility (*munāsabāt*/مناسبات) with the ṣhaykh is an essential condition for reformation (إصلاح/‘iṣlāḥ) of the nafs.

What?

The sign of the existence of compatibility (*munāsabāt*) between the murīd and his shaykh is that the heart of the murīd does not object to the statements and acts of the shaykh nor does he speculate about the shaykh's judgements. A bond of sincerity (*kḥulūs*) is generated between seeker and sought (*murīd wa murād*/مرید و مراد). In their mutuality the shaykh considers the murīd to be his and the murīd considers the shaykh to be his and there is no friction or discord between them. Should any objection arise in the heart regarding the shaykh, the murīd should grieve and feel remorse.

This time is often referred to as the time of “breaking your legs” and demands that the murīd spend as much time as possible with the shaykh, carefully observing him in all his states and faithfully carrying out the various ‘jobs’ or ‘tasks’ the shaykh assigns.

This is the truly big difference between the shuyukḥ of ʿilm and barakah and the shuyukḥ of tarbiyah. So often we hear that such and such a shaykh has hundreds or even thousands of muridūn. But in truth what kind of training can they really be receiving? Yes for sure there is transmission of knowledge and blessings but what of the disobedience of the unruly self or the arrogance of the stiff heart?

Of course we must acknowledge there is a blessing in holding to the shaykh of barakah in that the muridūn have unity and community, as in the ḥadīth, “The hand of Allāh ﷻ is with the *jamaʿah* (group).”

The murīd must actively commit himself to the shaykh and his teachings with a clean heart, clear mind, focus and total commitment. Obviously a murīd who has entered into the relationship of the *bayʿah* but who does not follow up on that *bayʿah* in terms of investment of time and service will not, in most cases, benefit to the same degree as the murīd who fully gives of himself to the shaykh, his teachings and the various tasks to which he is assigned.

At the very least the murīd should arrange to spend time with the shaykh if only for the weekly *majlis*. Ideally, as we have just mentioned, he should seek further and deeper contact with the shaykh for training/nurturing (*tarbiyah*), for it is this training, along with adherence on the part of the murīd to the Laws of Allāh, both outer and inner, (*ʿāḥkamu-l-dḥāhirah wa ʿāḥkamu-l-baṭiniyyah*), that surely brings about *tazkiyyah* or purification of the self.

What?

What might be useful at this point is to try and reach a better understanding of some of the ways ṭaṣawwuf functions in our time.

To do this we must first of all understand the tremendous stress that ṭaṣawwuf has been subjected to especially over the course of the past two hundred years which mark the rise of the Neo-Kḥarajite/Najdi/Wahhabi/Salafi doctrine(s) and, arguably, even more intense pressures that have been brought against ṭaṣawwuf since the middle of the twentieth gregorian century and the rise and power of the petrocrats and oilagarchs in our time, both Sunni and Shīʿa who are virulently opposed to ṭaṣawwuf albeit for different reasons.

Because Wahhabis claim to be “true Sunnis,” it is difficult for one who is unfamiliar with Wahhabism to distinguish it from orthodox Sunni Islam. If a Wahhabi is asked if he/she is Sunni, he/she will always reply in the affirmative. When asked if they are Wahhabis, they reply with an emphatic “no” as they consider it an insult to what they believe and stand for: “Purity of worship and reverence to Allāh ﷻ alone. The authentic carriers of Islam from the time of the Prophet ﷺ until now.” Calling them Wahhabis implies that they learned ideas from a man – Muhammad ibn Abdul-Wahhab – instead of the Qurʾān and Sunnah – the two great sources of Islam. However irrespective of what they think, they are not following authentic Islamic sources, but their own interpretations of the doctrine of the founder of a movement that appeared in the 1700s.

Wahhabis differentiate themselves from orthodox Sunnis by labeling themselves Salafis, which refers to the word *salaf* (سلف) – the time period in which the early Muslims lived in the first 300 years after the Hijra, or emigration, of the Prophet ﷺ from Makkah to Madinah in 622. The Companions (الصحابه/ *aṣ-Ṣaḥābah*) ﷺ, those who followed the Companions (التابعون/ *at-Tābiʿīn*) ﷺ, and those who followed those (تابع التابعين/ *Tābʿa at-Tābiʿīn*) who followed the Companions ﷺ who lived in the time period of the Salaf are exemplars par excellence of what Muslims should be, as the Prophet ﷺ had praised these Muslims as being the best of Muslims. Therefore, it has been the aim of every Muslim since the time of the Prophet ﷺ to adhere to and to follow the footsteps of the adherents of the salaf. This means that when a Wahhabi calls himself a Salafi, he claims to be a genuine follower of the oriignial pure and pristine ʾIslām. This, however, is far from the truth.

What?

Orthodox Sunni Muslims also believe that they are the true bearers of pristine Islam and have been since the time period of the Salaf. Because there were time gaps between the noble period of the Salaf and centuries that followed, the authentic positions of the early Muslims were passed by scholars in those times and afterwards to later generations via meticulous, systematic, and methodological means of preservation. The knowledge was passed from qualified scholars to other qualified scholars through the centuries, who, in turn, passed it to the masses. This uninterrupted chain of knowledge from the time of the Salaf until now has been authentically preserved by the orthodox Sunnis. Orthodox Sunnis believe their roots are with the Salaf as represented today by the four surviving Sunni schools (*madhāh'ib*) of Islamic jurisprudence: Maliki, Shafi'ī, Hanafi, and Hanbali schools.

The Wahhabis, by calling themselves Salafis, not only claim to follow the footsteps of the early Muslims, but also use semantics to fool and allure less informed Muslims into accepting Wahhabism. Wahhabis say, “You must follow the Muslims of the Salaf,” which is undoubtedly true. Then come the Wahhabi semantics: “Therefore you must be a Salafi and nothing else. Following anything else means you’re following a path that is different from the Muslims of the Salaf.” By such deceptive semantics, the less informed Muslims believe that Salafis must truly represent the pristine interpretations of the early Muslims of the Salaf. After all, the word Salafi sounds like Salaf, so it must truly be representative of it. Far from it. When the less informed goes beyond semantics and blind faith and investigates what a Salafi believes, the truth unveiled is that the understanding of Salafis (Wahhabis) is different and contradictory to the understanding and positions of the pious Muslims who lived in the Salaf – and the majority of Muslims who have ever lived.

as-Sunnah Foundation of America, under the supices of Shaykh Hisham Kabbani, has produced numerous publications on the scourge of these mis-guided sects – call them what you will – and I direct the reader to their website to know more about this subject.

Suffice it to say that these sects, fueled during the past 50 years by abundant petro-dollars and access to thoroughly modern information technology, have done everything in their power to vilify Ṭaṣawwuf and those who practice it labelling them dogs and worse.

What?

Just go back 75 years and look at the attacks on Makkah and Madinah by “Muslims” who claimed that the inhabitants of Makkah and Madinah were not truly Muslims (this courtesy of the magic of *takfir*) so it was permissible to kill them, in cold blood, and to usurp the wealth and destroy the honor of the families of other Muslims? How is this possible and how is it that Muslims have come to such a state when the Prophet ﷺ was sent as mercy to all creation?

In one word — IGNORANCE and, accompanying it, SHAME.

Many Muslims in this time instead of seeking the Truth contained in the Qurʾān and the Sunnah of the Blessed Prophet ﷺ, and the dimension of mercy (*rahmah*), have instead constructed, and daily are in the process of further constructing a new parallel religion which they call ʾIslām and represent to the whole world as ʾIslām, but, which, in Truth is a travesty of ʾIslām – a mockery and a lie.

This creation of this new parallel religion has preceded apace over the last 200 years or so since the introduction of the doctrine of Wahhābism (also known as we have mentioned as Salafism under the auspices of Muḥammad ʾIbn ʿAbd al Wahhāb from Ulyana, in Najd and his descendants, who were influenced by the teachings of the lapsed Hanbali faqīh ʾIbn Taymiyya (1263-1328) who was, in the end pronounced a *‘lā madhābi*’ (one without a school) heretic.

The doctrinal roots of opposition to Ṣūfism among today's Sunni ʾIslāmists can be found in the writings of ʾIbn Taymiyya. In his imagined quest to purify the Muslim faith, ʾIbn Taymiyya vigorously opposed what he termed Ṣūfī pantheism and such practices as the worship of saints and pilgrimages to their shrines, although he accepted a Ṣūfism based on ʾIslāmic legalism and tradition. In the hands of Muhammad ʾIbn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, even ʾIbn Taymiyya's grudging acceptance of Ṣūfism was transformed into a comprehensive condemnation and blanket prohibition of all Ṣūfis and all Ṣūfī orders. This critical stance toward Ṣūfism, its members and their practices can be found among all major exponents of modern ʾIslāmist thought, such as the journalist Abu al-Aʿla Mawdudi, on whom the religious scholars (*ʿulema*) of Pakistan made a *fatwa* that he was a heretic who tried to make others heretics; or Sayyid Qutb, whom the *ʿulema* of al-Azhar took the unusual step following his death of including in their index of heresy, declaring him a “deviant” (*munharif*); or ʿAbd as-Salam Faraj, who

What?

wrote that the “true soldiers of ʿIslām are willing to use any means available in order to achieve their righteous goals” or al-Albani, a watch repairman by trade, who had no known teacher in any of the ʿIslāmic sciences and achieved fame by attacking the great scholars of *Ahl al-Sunna* and reviling the friends of Allāh ﷺ (*awliya-ʿullāh*). or Faṭḥi Yakan of Lebanon, who famously (and fatuously) said of Osama bin Ladin, “He is a man after my own heart.”

Indeed a dominant theme in the ideology and activities of contemporary (and usually worldly) Sunni ʿIslāmist movements is a deep-seated opposition to all forms of Ṣūfism. (note that there are no Ṣūfī suicide bombers or acid throwers – about more later)

Despite past instances of convergence and overlapping between Ṣūfī (such as that of Abd al-Qadir al-Jazaʿiri or the early teachings of Ḥasan al-Banna) and revivalist movements, their mutual antagonism has become pronounced particularly in the contemporary milieu of heightened political ʿIslāmism. By anchoring themselves on the legalist tradition of ʿIbn Taymiyya, these modern-day ʿIslāmists rejected almost all Ṣūfī beliefs and ceremonial practices as being heretical innovations (*bidʿa*) and superstitions (*kḥurāfāt*).

Instead of the Ṣūfī’s inner-directed spirituality, the ʿIslāmists advocate outward religious-political activism, where a person’s piety can be outwardly demonstrated and socially validated in terms of the *shariʿah*. Indeed, the ultimate quest of the ʿIslāmists is to capture the ʿIslāmic popular mainstream by imposing a single homogenizing monolithic ideology as a means to agitate and mobilize the masses as a prelude to achieving political control.

Thus in truth their real objective is impious and political rather than religious, much less spiritual, and all that is necessary for the triumph of evil in the end is that the Godly and good do nothing.

At the same time the Shiʿa have also actively been involved in the villification of Ṭasawwuf to the point of selectively jailing individual Ṣūfīs and destroying their shrines and khānegāh.

Consider the following taken directly from a Shiʿa website.

“Al-Husayn bin Abul Khatṭab said, ‘One day, I was with Abul Hasan al-Hadi (a.s.) in the mosque of the Prophet (a.s.) when some of his companions, among whom was Abu Hashim al-Jaʿfari, came to him.

What?

Abu Hashim was an eloquent man and had a high position near Imam al-Hadi (a.s.). While we were standing, a group of Sufis came into the mosque. They sat in a corner of the mosque and began saying “la ilaha illallah; there is no god but Allah”. Imam al-Hadi (a.s.) turned towards his companions and said to them, ‘Do not pay attention to these deceivers for they are allies of the Devils and destroyers of the bases of religion. They become ascetic to relieve their bodies and watch to hunt cattle...they do not practice rites except to deceive people, and do not decrease food except to...cheat the fool...their worship is but dancing and clapping, and their praises are but singing. No one follows them except the stupid, and no one believes in them except the fools. Whoever went to visit any of them alive or dead as if he went to visit Satan and idolaters, and whoever supported any of them it is just the same as if he supported, Yazid, Mo’awiya and Abu Sufyan...’

“One of the companions said, ‘Even if he acknowledges our rights?’

“Imam al-Hadi (a.s.) scolded him and shouted, ‘Do not say that! He, who acknowledges our rights, does not disobey us. Do you not know that they (the Ṣūfīs) are the worst group and their way is contrary to ours? They are but the Christians and magi of this nation. They do their best to put out the light of Allah with their mouths, and Allah will not consent save to perfect His light, though the unbelievers are averse.” (9:32)

From such quotes we can see that those who seek to perfect their “selves” through the way of ṭasawwuf are under attack or at least suspicion from both sides of the imagined ideological divide.

Even if the examples we cite represent extremes among the sunni and the shi‘a community you will find that in general the response to ṭasawwuf or ṣūfīsm among contemporary sunnis and shi‘a is for the most part negative or at least highly suspicious which is why, if for no other reason, it is important through our speaking and our writing to attempt to clarify just what ṭasawwuf is and what it isn’t.

Speaking personally, it took me many years as a Muslim revert to come to a real understanding of what I understand the truth to be in this matter of ṭasawwuf seen from both the extreme, if not general, sunni and shi‘a perspectives and much of what lies in between. As always the Words of Allāh ﷻ in the Qur’ān prove most helpful in clarifying the subject. Allāh says,

What?

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا

wa kadḥalika ja^calnākum °ummatañw-wasaṭā

and so We have made you to be a community of the middle

we could also translate that phrase as:

and so We have made you to be a community of the heart

or

and so We have made you to be a community of the middle way

or

and so We have made you to be a community of the center

(Sūratu-l-Baqarah 2:143)

There are also saḥiḥ ahādīth from the Prophet ﷺ which explain this °āyāt, saying that what is meant by *ummatan wasaṭā* is what is just and what is best,

When I consider this with two other °āyāt I find it very much to the point that the reader or the listener will grasp for themselves the way out of these views. Those who have read or listened to some of my talks will be familiar with my frequent use of these two °āyāt:

كَتَبَ رَبُّكُمْ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ الرَّحْمَةَ

kataba rabbukum °ala nafsīhi-r-raḥmah

...your Lord has written Mercy upon Himself

(al-°An°ām 6:54)



وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

wa mā °arslanāka °illā raḥmatal-li-l-°ālamīn

and We have not sent you except as a Mercy to all the Worlds

(Sūrah al-°Ambiyā° 21:107)

The reason that I keep coming back to them is because in them I find the answer to many questions including the one of “What?” which is what we are concerned with in this essay.

When these °āyāt are taken together several things become clear.

The first of these is that the dilemma represented by the mutual contemporary incomprehension (and worse) of both sunnis and shī'a of the reason or need for ṭaṣawwuf is handily resolved.

What?

When Allāh ﷻ calls for a balanced community, a middle community, a community of the heart, a central community, a community of the middle way we would be very hard put to think that such an appellation or designation could be applied to either sunni or shi'a ʾIslām in the present – to individual sunnis or shi'a of good will, yes, of course – but to either “sunnism” or “shi'ism” in a larger context – difficult at best.

I know many people may be shocked by my saying this but let me recount an example of what I mean. It is the year 1435H/2011CE and it is Ramaḍān and it is Jumu'ah and I am watching the daily news. I see a picture. A young Syrian boy, presumably Muslim, in uniform is shooting a another young Syrian Muslim boy in civilian clothes as he is leaving a masjid after Friday prayer. Later on during the same same news-program I watch as Sa'udi tanks roll over copies of the Qur'ān inside a masjid that has just been bulldozed in Bahrein and a little further on, again in the same news broadcast I watch troops loyal to President Saleh, a Zaydi Shia Muslim from the al-Ahmar family, which is the ruling family of the Hashid tribal confederacy randomly shooting people including women and children as they march, without weapons, to protest his governance.

With this is mind recall the words of the Prophet ﷺ, “There will come a time for my people when there will remain nothing of the Qur'ān except its outward form and nothing of ʾIslām except its name and they will call themselves by this name even though they are the people furthest from it. The masājid will be full of people but they will be empty of goodness. The fuqahā' (الفقهاء) of that day will be the most evil religious leaders under the heavens; sedition and dissension will go out from them and to them will it return” And he ﷺ also said, “In those days the believers among the unbelievers will not be more than a white hair on (the body of a) black ox or a black hair on (the body of a) white ox.” Saḥiḥ Muslim 1:427

Many Muslims may get upset and even enraged by this statement but as someone who has taught the children of Muslims for more than a quarter of a century I can tell you that, judging by the lack of knowledge of their children, the parents are for the most part misinformed, ill-informed, under-educated and lack all kinds of basic knowledge including such basics as how to wash, how to pray and how to fast and when to fast and what is and isn't, zakāt etc.

What?

On top of that there is a dearth of knowledge about Allāh ﷻ, His Prophet ﷺ, the family ﷺ of the Prophet ﷺ, his friends ﷺ and his companions ﷺ and about the religion of ʾIslām itself

Here let me pose some questions. “How is it possible that a Muslim would throw acid in the face of a girl child on her way to school in the belief that he was somehow performing an ʾIslāmic act?”

Or, “How can a Muslim man strap on a suicide vest and go into a maṣjid of a different sect at the time of *Jumuʿah* prayers and blow up himself along with thirty or forty other human beings?

What are your thoughts on ‘Jihadis’ who justify the cultivation, production and selling of opium and heroin to non-Muslims in the West on the grounds that is *ḥalāl* to poison the *kafir* and use the cash returns to fund *jihād* in the name of ʾIslām?

How can a woman be kept locked up in her house because her husband has been killed and, because she is a widow and no longer has any male *muḥrim*, she is then confined to her house under threat of public beating, and her children have to go to beg and often prostitute themselves?

How about the young Afghan mother with a feverish child who desperately needs to see a doctor. The mother is alone and the doctor is across town. She had no male relative to escort her. To ask another man to do so would be to risk severe punishment. To go on her own meant that she would risk flogging. Because she loved her child, she had no choice. On her way she was spotted by a teenage Ṭalibān guard who tried to stop her. Intent on saving her child, the mother ignored him, hoping that he would ignore her. He didn't. Instead he raised his gun and shot them. Both mother and child fell to the ground dead. The young Ṭalibān guard, when asked, was unrepentant, saying, “she should not have been out alone.”

What about the ex-mujadidīn schoolteacher who was murdered in front of his students, to whom he was teaching Qurʾān, by three Ṭalibān because they said his pants (*sirwāl*/سروال) were too long.

How is this possible?



What?

ثُمَّ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ يَكْفُرُ بَعْضُكُم بِبَعْضٍ
وَيُلْعَنُ بَعْضُكُمْ بَعْضًا وَمَأْوَاكُمُ النَّارُ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن نَّاصِرِينَ

thumma yawma-l-qiyamāti yakfuru ba°ḍukum bi-ba°ḍin wa yal°anu
ba°ḍukum ba°ḍan wa mā wākumu-n-naru wa mā lakum miñ nāsirīn

Then you will reject one another and curse one another.

The Fire will be your shelter. You will have no helpers.

(Sūratu-l-°Añabūt 29:25)



Have you heard of any ṣufī suicide bombers or have you heard about any ṣufīs who threw acid in the faces of young girls seeking an education, given that the Prophet ﷺ educated his own wife °Ā'ishā ؓ and declared “knowledge was the lost property of the muslims”? or when was the last time you heard about ṣūfīs shooting women in the street at night or murdering teachers of Qur°ān?

Yet ṣufīs are regularly referred to by “mainstream” muslims as rāfiḍīs (deserters/رافضي) or and even...dogs...though according to some sūfīs even dogs also have their good points.

The Prophet ﷺ told of a women who was considered to be a transgressor as she was a prostitute. While traveling in the desert, she came upon a well by which was standing a dog panting with thirst. Moved by pity she fashioned a bucket out of her shoe and a rope of from her hijab to draw water for the dog. For this Allāh ﷻ blessed her in both His worlds. The Prophet ﷺ related that on his Night Journey (mi°rāj/المعراج) he saw her, radiant as the moon with the whole paradise at her disposal.

When the transgressor gave water to the dog, her reward from Allāh ﷻ was that of merit many times over. If you bring peace for a moment to a heart, the merit therefrom cannot be compared with the two worlds. This is because the heart is without self and the merit therefrom goes beyond even the two worlds.

In another story Ṣhaykh °Abū Bakr Ṣhiblī ؓ related that “I learned Ṣūfism from a dog who was sleeping by the door of a house. The master of the house came out and drove it away but the dog came back. I said to myself ‘How wretched this dog is, when driven away he still comes back.’

What?

The dog, on the orders of Allāh ﷻ said, “Oh Shaykh, where should I go? He is my master.”

“For forty years,” said Shiblī ﷺ, “whatever state Allāh ﷻ has kept me in I have not resented it, and to whatever state He transferred me I have not been angry.”

The following story bears out this assertion. A man who disbelieved in Shiblī ﷺ sent him an invitation to dinner. Shiblī ﷺ accepted, and got as far as the door of his house when the man began to shout:

“Glutton, gorging, there is nothing here for you. Go home!”

Shiblī ﷺ went home. He had gone only a little way when the man called out to him:

“Shaykh, come here!”

Shiblī ﷺ returned.

“You are very eager to eat,” the man taunted him. “There is still less. Be off with you!”

So Shiblī ﷺ departed and the man summoned him again, and he went back.

“Eat stones, or go home!”

Shiblī ﷺ went off once more. Thirty times the man summoned him and drove him away. Thirty times the shaykh came and went, without showing the least discomposure. Then the man fell at his feet and with tears repented, becoming his disciple.

“What a man you are!” he exclaimed. “Thirty times I drove you off with ill manners, and yet you showed not the slightest upset.”

“This is an easy matter,” Shiblī ﷺ replied. “Dogs do the same. When you drive them away they go, and when you call them they come, without showing any discomposure. A thing in which dogs equal us cannot really be accounted anything. Men’s work is something quite other.”

Shiblī ﷺ had been a high official of the khalif when he met al-Junayd ﷺ, and recognizing him became his student at once. al-Junayd ﷺ gave him the job of selling salt in the town market for a year.” Shiblī ﷺ did as he was bade and plunged headlong into the business. He was mocked but remained calm. At the end of a year, Shiblī ﷺ returned to al-Junayd ﷺ who said: “Not much though! Your improvement is only marginal. Still a really long way to go!

What?

“So, now go and beg food in the streets of Baghdad for a year”

So Shibli ؓ set off to beg food in the streets of Baghdad; a city where he had once enjoyed a very high position and social standing. al-Junayd ؓ asked one day, “Do you realise your true worth now at least, you rascal?” Another year passed and then al-Junayd ؓ told Shibli ؓ to go around the kingdom and beg pardon from all those he had wronged during his tenure in the court of the khalifah. This took him four years. Upon his return, al-Junayd ؓ told him to beg for another year. In the last year of begging, people gave him food and other things generously. They had come to know of Shibli’s ؓ honesty and integrity. Shibli ؓ deposited what he received at the feet of al-Junayd ؓ, who distributed it to the needy. This lasted seven or eight years. One day al-Junayd ؓ asked Shibli ؓ, “How do you feel now?” Shibli ؓ replied, “I deem myself among the lowest creatures of Allāh ﷻ.” Junayd ؓ embraced his worthy disciple. °Abū Bakr ash-Shibli ؓ had at last become a wali of Allāh ﷻ...and that, among many other reasons, is why you don’t find Şūfī suicide bombers or Şūfīs who murder women in the street at night no matter what...no matter what.

So now go back to the °āyāt,

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا

wa kadhalika ja°alnākum °ummatañw-wasaṭā

and so We have made you to be a community of the middle ,
a community of the heart, a community of the center.



This is the “what” we are talking about when we talk about ṭaşawwuf. This outlook, this training, this life.

Undoubtedly this is why there are very few people who really are people of ṭaşawwuf. For this reason we said at the beginning that although people would like to create divisions and bring about sectarian warfare it is not really a question of Sunni vs. Shi°a, no matter how much that might serve some people’s purposes and fulfill their agenda. That is what they would like.

It really is much more a matter of the vast majority of Muslims who have for one reason or another elected, knowingly or unknowingly, to follow Yazīd and ultimately reject al-Ḥusayn ؓ.

What?

And even more than that what we are always talking about is:

كَتَبَ رَبُّكُمْ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ الرَّحْمَةَ

kataba rabbukum °ala nafsihī-r-rahmah
...your Lord has written Mercy upon Himself
(al-°An°ām 6:54)



وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

wa mā °arslanāka °illā rahmatal-li-l-°ālamīn
and We have not sent you except as a Mercy to all the Worlds
(Sūrah al-°Ambiyā° 21:107)



On the face of it the statement concerning the people among the Muslim °ummah who follow Yazīd and those who follow al-Ḥusayn ؑ is a statement that provokes a lot of controversy.

It is very important to understand just whom we are talking about and what their legacy, heritage, endowment, gift, patrimony – call it what you will – actually is.

Just this past year a lot of people who I thought were my friends left me because I took the position that Yazīd had won at Karbala and his successors were still in charge judging by the forthright words of Sayyidatina Zaynab ؑ in her speech to the tyrant Ubaidullah Ibn Ziyad in Kufah and the oppressor (ظالم) Yazīd in Damascus.

“You will soon go before the Prophet ﷺ and will see with your own eyes that his children are in Paradise. It will be the day when Allāh ﷻ will deliver the descendants of that Holy Prophet ﷺ from the state of being scattered and will bring all of them together in Paradise. This is the sacred promise which Allāh ﷻ has made in the Qur°ān when Allāh ﷻ says,

وَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ قُتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أَمْوَاتًا بَلْ أَحْيَاءُ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ يُزُقُونَ

wa lā taḥsabanna-lladhīna qutilū fī sabīli-llāhī °amwātān bal
°aḥya°an °īnda rabbiḥim yurzaqūn

Do not think of those who are slain for the cause of Allah as dead.
They are alive with their Lord and receive sustenance from Him.

(Sūrah °Āl °Īmrān 3:169)

What?

Now go back to an earlier part of this essay when I write about *tarbiyah* and try to understand what I mean when I say that, at a certain level, *ṭasawwuf is ṭarbiyyah*.

Yazīd is the son of Muawiyah and was raised by him and he is the son of Hind and ʿĀbu Sufyan who raised him.

al-Ḥusayn ؑ is the son of Fāṭimah az-Zahra ؑ and ʿAlī ؑ and was raised by them and also he is the grandson of the Prophet ﷺ who also raised him.

Now substitute the word *raised* for *ṭarbiyyah* and ask yourself, irregardless of the events in Makkah when the Prophet ﷺ accepted the tawbah of Hind and ʿĀbu Sufyan, who, just on the basis of things as they are, would have the best chance to understand what ʿIslam truly was both on an inner and outer basis?

Oh reader! Oh listener! None of this is about Sunni vs Shiʿa unless you think that Fāṭimah az-Zahra ؑ and ʿAlī ؑ are Shiʿa any more than the grandson ؑ of the Prophet ﷺ can possibly be thought of as as anything more or less than a Muslim, and moreover a Muslim who had the great and providential advantage of being raised, mentored, trained and taught by the best of all possible teachers ﷺ.

So when Allāh ﷻ says,

وَأْتُوا الْبُيُوتَ مِنْ أَبْوَابِهَا

waʾtū-l-buyūta min ʾabwābiḥā
so enter the house by its door
(Suratu-l-Baqarah 2:189)

and the Prophet ﷺ says

ʾana madīnatu-l-ʿilm wa ʿalīyu bābuhā

I am the City of Knowledge and ʿAlī is it's door

(recorded by at-Tirmidhī and al-Ḥakim. as-Suyuti says this Hadith is Ḥasan)

which is the door you would enter if you really want to know?

There are still those who believe that forgeries, fancy words, and booklets can mask the shining truth. Persistent attempts to distance al-Ḥusayn ؑ and his Sirah away from Ahlu-s-Sunnah are ongoing, and more intense and serious than ever. This Yazīdi line, regardless of what banner or name they choose, can no longer fool the Muslim who thinks. Their scare tactics, labeling, and “intellectual terrorism” are weapons of the past, and no longer effective for those who see.

What?

While we must pray for their guidance, we shall never fall as victims to their misguidance.

We know that an evil man called Yazîd, seized the ʾIslāmīc government in its early days and al-Ḥusayn ؑ and other superior personalities of the household of the Prophet ﷺ endeavored to save ʾIslām and all Muslims and were defeated at Karbalāʾ.

The refusal of al-Ḥusayn ؑ ibn ʿAlī ؑ to declare allegiance to Yazîd is that of the generality of the Companions in Madīnah and Makkah including ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAmr ibn al-ʿAs. and the totality of the veterans of Baḍr. It was predicted by Abū Hurayra ؓ in many narrations pertaining to the Banū ʾUmayyah and to Yazîd specifically. ʾAbū Hurayra ؓ decried the governor of Madīnah, Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam, and warned of a terrible disaster about to befall the Arabs, and prayed for death before the year 60, the year the Yazîd ibn Muʿāwiyah came to power, under whose rule three scandals took place:

al-Ḥusayn ؑ ibn ʿAlī ؑ was killed; Madīnah was ransacked for three days (al-Harra) during which many of the surviving Companions ؓ were massacred, after which no survivor of the battle of Baḍr was left on earth and a thousand unmarried women gave birth to fatherless children; finally, the Kaʿbah was destroyed and burnt, after which time Yazîd died.

ʾAbū Hurayra ؓ said: “Woe to the Arabs for a disaster that is fast approaching! The rule of young boys: if you obey them they shall cause you to enter the Fire, and if you disobey them they shall strike your necks and take your heads with the sword.”

Another version also from him states: “Woe to the Arabs for a disaster that is fast approaching at the turn of the year 60! The public trust will become spoils of war, almsgiving will be considered a fine, people will only bear witness for their friends, and lusts will govern.”

As Shaykh Ninowy said, “The whole battle is for man’s keeping hold of Ḥaqq and Freedom. And that can only be done by the highest examples of conduct – spiritual striving and suffering, enduring firmness of faith and purpose, patience and courage where ordinary mortals would give in or be cowed down, the sacrifice of ordinary motives to supreme truth in scorn of consequence.

What?

“The martyr bears witness, and the witness redeems what would otherwise be called failure. It so happened with al-Ḥusayn ؑ the Master of the youth of Ahlu-j-Jannah. For all were touched by the story of his martyrdom, and it gave the deathblow to the tyrant politics of Yazīd bin Mu‘awiyah and all the oppression it stood for. And Imam al-Ḥusayn ؑ being alive, more alive than ever, not only externally but living profoundly deep in our hearts, in our souls, and in our minds, has still the power to ignite the light of truth in the heart of all free, to send a message to the courageous not to bow down to evil, and to teach people not to surrender to tyranny.”

And he is precisely alive due to the lines of transmission and trees marking out the branches of that “blessed olive tree, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil almost glows though no fire has never touched it. Light upon light, Allāh guides anyone He wants to His light.” (24:35) that keep the teachings of al-Ḥusayn ؑ and his father ؑ and grandfather ؑ alive in every generation.

We are not of the people who weep for the past and sentimentalize the present because we know that everyday is the Day of ‘Ashūrā’ and every place is Karbalā’ and that neither the battle nor the war is over but is raging all around us every minute of every day.

In truth the knowledge of this is what makes one a Ṣūfī and acting upon that knowledge is the “*what*” of Ṭaṣawwuf.

We do not despair because we are few and the enemy is ranged all around us. That is simply how it is and everyone knows.

Yes everyone knows that on the 9th of Muḥarram, al-Ḥusayn ؑ spent the night with 72 family members and followers to pray and recite Qur’ān. And everyone knows that on the 10th Muḥarram, al-Ḥusayn ؑ prayed the morning prayer and led all his men into battle and everyone knows that all of the menfolk including all his sons save one and all the followers of al-Ḥusayn ؑ were slaughtered and their bodies trampled into the dust.

Everyone knows – people cry and beat themselves and still sell out.

And people also know that one man, a general at that, from among those ranged against al-Ḥusayn ؑ came to him and that man’s name was Ḥurr and everyone knows that in Arabic *ḥurr* (حرر) means freedom and those who know remember that his commander called out to him as he rode out of the line: What are you doing?

What?

Do you want to join al-Ḥusayn ؑ? Hurr began to tremble and al-Muhajr said: “You have caused me doubt; I swear by Allāh that I have never seen you like this in any situation and if someone asked me about the most courageous man in Kufah, I would have never chosen anyone else other than you. But what happened to you today? And Hurr ؑ replied: For the sake of Allāh ﷻ, I am choosing between heaven and hell and by Allāh ﷻ I’ll never choose but heaven even if I am to be cut into pieces and burnt. Hurr ؑ appeared before al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī ؑ, with tears in his eyes begging for his pardon for his past wrong choice and was received very warmly by al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī ؑ and his companions as special guest and joyously died with him that day in Karbalāʾ.

And everyone knows that is the choice that everyone who puts his hand in the hand of the one who has walked through the Door ؑ into the City of Knowledge ﷻ makes.

For surely Allāh ﷻ says,

فَضْرِبْ دَيْنَهُمْ بِسُورٍ لَهُ بَابٌ بَاطِنٌ فِيهِ الرَّحْمَةُ وَظَاهِرٌ مِنْ قِبَلِهِ الْعَذَابُ

faḍuriba baynahum bi sūril-lahu bābun bāṭinuhu
fihi -r-raḥmatu wa ḡhāhiruhu min qibalihi-l-ʿadhābā

And a wall will be erected between them with a gate in it,
on the inside of which there will be mercy
and outside of it is torment.

(Sūratu-l-Ḥadīd 57:13)



And go back further into that night of the ninth of Muḥarram, into that tent when al-Ḥusayn ؑ understood that he had to offer the sacrifice termed by Allāh ﷻ as the Great Sacrifice (37:104-108) (*ḡhāba ʿadhīm*/ذبح عظيم). The purity of both his body and his soul were unquestionable, but those whom he had to offer along with himself in the way of the Lord, had also to be pure. As with all groups there were the good and the bad ones, mixed up, in his camp, but what he needed was only a totally pure sacrifice to be presented to Allāh ﷻ along with himself. Many who had originally accompanied him with selfish intentions, had deserted him, and of those still left, al-Ḥusayn ؑ wanted to effect a final shifting so that only those who desired nothing but the pleasure of the Lord, might remain to accompany him to the Jannah.

What?

On the 9th Muharram, soon after the enemy's consent to wait till the following morning, al-Ḥusayn ؑ, after the night prayers (al-°Ishā°/ صلاة العشاء), summoned the remaining people and addressed them thus: "I am most pleased with you. I know no companions more loyal or better than my companions and no household more reverent or pious than my household, so may Allāh ﷻ bless you for my sake because you have been good and cooperative. I do not think that the enemies will give us a day more than tomorrow.

"You are all free, my companions, members of my family, my sons, and my nephews – everyone – to leave without being liable for anything. I release you from the oath and excuse you all and you may go free from my obligation. They (the enemy forces) have nothing against anyone except me. Do not feel guilty; the night is dark. Take advantage of the darkness of the night and depart, let each one of you take the hand of one of my household. Leave me to my fate and save yourselves. They will definitely not stop you."

At the end of his speech, the al-Ḥusayn ؑ asked his brother °Abbās ؑ to put out the lamp in the tent so that people might walk away in the darkness without being ashamed at being seen.

So saying, al-Ḥusayn ؑ snuffed out all the lights and darkness enveloped them for a long time. At that time, there were few hundred persons besides al-Ḥusayn ؑ, but, when the lamps were lit, only fifty-four companions remained, in addition to al-Ḥusayn's ؑ kith and kin. Altogether they numbered seventy-two and it was these holy seventy-two who stood fast by al-Ḥusayn ؑ in the battle for Truth against the Lie.

These remaining seventy-two people said unanimously that their defection was impossible. "Oh son of the Prophet ﷺ, what would we tell the people, shall we say that we have abandoned our chief and leader, the son of the daughter ؑ of our Prophet ﷺ, without lancing an arrow for him or stabbing with a spear for him or striking a sword for him; by Allāh ﷻ we will not leave you until we die before you and let us share your fate with you for life after you is meaningless. What answer we will give to the Prophet ﷺ on the Day of Resurrection? What will happen to loyalty, to humanity, to love and attachment? By Allāh ﷻ we will never abandon you, so that by our unswerving loyalty to and love for you, Allāh ﷻ will know that we have kept our word to His Prophet Muhammad ﷺ."

What?

But there is an even deeper truth and mystery to be known of that night for in that night all the seventy two were shown paradise.

al-Husayn ؑ said to his sister Zaynab ؑ, “Oh dear sister: Be conscious (*taqwa*) of Allāh ؑ, console yourself with the consolation of Allāh ؑ, and know that inhabitants of this earth shall inexorably die and the inhabitants of the heavens shall not survive forever. Also, be it known to you that everything shall perish except Almighty Allāh ؑ. Who has created all the creatures out of His omnipotence and they all shall return to Him. He is Single and One.

كُلُّ مَنْ عَلَيْهَا فَانٍ • وَيَبْقَى وَجْهُ رَبِّكَ ذُو الْجَلَالِ وَالْإِكْرَامِ

kullu man °alayhā fān •

wa yabāqa wajhu rabbika dhū-l-jalali wa-l-°ikrām

everything upon it shall disappear
but the Face of your Lord will remain,
Master of Majesty and Generosity

(Sūratu-r-Raḥmān 55:26-27)

To the seventy-two companions of al-Husayn ؑ, that night was the brightest in their lives; they could not wait for the dawn of the next day on which they would enter the Garden and settle in the endless bliss. Ḥabīb ibn Muḍḥahir ؑ, for instance, was very cheerful, and when he was asked why, he answered, “It is only a few hours and those tyrants will come to attack us with their swords and cause us to enter the Garden. There is no time more worthy than this. Surely this is the greatest sweetness there is.”

موت قبل أنت يموت — mawt qabla anta yamawt”

'Die before you die. And this day will last for ever,

“No one knows what is going to happen tomorrow, and when he is going to be deprived of the glory, strength and security which has been bestowed upon him. Who is the person, who has not lost the game during his life, and where is the powerful man, whose strength has not been damaged by the vicissitudes of events?

By saying this al-Husayn ؑ, told them that on the following day many would meet martyrdom. It is not possible for any person to make someone else take his place to face the events of time. The end of the matter is in the Hand of Allāh ؑ. Every living being must traverse this path. It was not only he and his companions who were faced that day with the inevitable.

What?

On the contrary the world at one time or another assumes the same countenance against everyone. So when we have an occasion like this when we gather together to consider various subjects of concern and the question is asked, “What is Ṭasawwuf?” perhaps now you have more insight into what it is and also what it isn’t.

All of this we hope provides some grist for the mill, food for thought, fuel for the fire and whatever other hackneyed cliches that might come to mind.

In the end I want to leave you with certain thoughts or ideas to consider in answering this question for yourself as well pointing at some disturbing characteristics of the time in which we find our selves. For that reason we put the title “Ṭasawwuf Now” on the header of the poster announcing these talks.

I would hope I have made somewhat clear to the listener or the reader the tremendous and unrelenting opposition that exists in the “Muslim” world today towards Tasawwuf or, if you prefer, Ṣūfism.

Further I hope that it is clear that this opposition proceeds from both the right and the left (so to speak), from the Wahhabi/Salafi/Archaic Revivalists/Neo-Kharijites etc as well as the many and various groups of Alphabet Soup Muslims such as ISNA, ICNA, IIIT, NAIT, CAIR etc. and the Modernist Pot Luck part time Muslims as well, the ones who teach that Salat is “5 times 5” meaning that all you have to really do is pray five times a day for five minutes and that “takes cares of business” and all will be A-OK with you know Hu.

And their viewpoints, on a perhaps grander scale, are those of the majority of the contemporary Sunnis and the Shi‘a as well.

It is perhaps worth recounting, briefly, the story of a recent revert to ʾIslam. a 60 year old IT systems manager for a major US corporation came to embrace ʾIslām through reading books on “Ṣūfism”.

After he had been convinced through reading, mainly the Traditionalists like Guénon, Schuon, Lings, Naṣr, that it made metaphysical sense, to become a Muslim he did so straight away and then, casting around for someone to teach him the practicalities, he found a fellow worker who happened to be a Shi‘a who taught him to make Ṣalat in the Ja‘farī manner and later, looking around for someone to pray with, he came upon a Masjid and went in to pray and when he started to pray they almost physically threw him out of the masjid.

What?

When he protested his *innocence* saying he was a new Muslim they told him that “they” would teach him to pray the “right” way to pray and, well, as you can imagine, one thing led to the other.

After he had learned how to pray the “right” way he fell into discussion with some of the regulars at the masjid and they, of course, were keen to know how he had become a Muslim and what had attracted him etc. (and also, no doubt, to make sure he wasn’t an FBI infiltrator, spy or undercover *agent provocateur*).

When he began to talk to them about *Ṣūfism* he said, “They just started rolling their eyes,” and told him that, “Brother, not only have we had to teach to how to pray “right” now we have to teach you how to think “right”. First of all forget all about *Ṣūfism* it will only get you in trouble and eventually bring you to *shirk* (pantheism)

After some months he woke up (so as to speak) and, as he explained it to me, he realised that what he was being “taught” was mostly irrelevant and, on top of it, totally inconsequential to his real questions concerning life and death and all that is inbetween.

Stuff like when you go into the masjid you go in with your right foot and when you leave you leave with your left foot and when you sneeze you say, “*Alḥamdulillāh*” and if you hear someone else sneeze you say “*Yarḥamukallāh*” and that when you wiggle your index finger during *at-taḥiyāt* (تحية) it should always be clockwise (though another brother had told him he shouldn’t wiggle it at all) and when you make *wuḍūʿ* (وضوء) you should never ever wash your arm from your elbow to your wrist but always from your wrist to your elbow lest you do it how “they” do it instead of how “we” do it etc.

He explained that before embracing ^oIslam he had been a rather solid conservative church-going Roman Catholic and after all of this he thought he was right back in the same place except that now he was a regular solid conservative mosque-going Muslim who dutifully attended pot lucks and listened to talks like, “Islam: Whence and Whither or “The Failure of Islam to meet Modern Challenges” or Islam and Terrorism: A Call for Understanding”.

Talking to him was like talking to some one who was in danger of either suffocating or imminently drowning and I was reminded of all the times I attended *jumuʿah* (الجمعة) (before I started giving the *kḥutbah* to escape the boredom) when everybody sat with heads bowed to allow the fat vapid words to float harmlessly overhead.

What?

If I sound mildly, or even militantly sarcastic, is it because by now I am so and more than that.

More than that for reasons I hope I have already explained such as acid in the faces of young school-going children, people blowing themselves up in masājid or launching RPG's at a busload of school children as "schools are no good." whilst at the same time for the most part rejecting Ṭaṣawwuf or Ṣūfism as something that will lead you straight to the fire as though killing innocent schoolchildren was somehow an honorable deed guaranteed to bring you to the garden and win the favor of Allāh ﷻ who is of course seated on His Throne checking to be sure you wiggle your finger in the right direction and that you have a *kufi* on your head when you pray.

Oh, and yes, I am fully cognizant that after every such "incident" there is a prefatory announcement by most of the Alphabet Soup Muslims that they deplore such incidents (though the members of al-Qaeda in the Arctic (or wherever) are most keen to take full responsibility and pose with their AK-47's) and these are the actions of the few and that most Muslims don't support such actions which is true as far it goes but the question is what *do* they support and what kind of Islam do they imagine for future Muslims?

I'm too old for the future but between the murderers and the alphabet suit and tie beardless wonders I'll take the *renegados* with their temporary autonomous zones and their flags on which is written "with love for all and malice toward none".

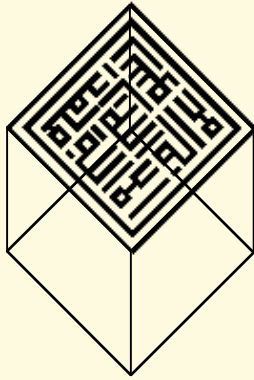
Indeed past, present, and future that is the world I would rather inhabit and, alhamdulillah, have successfully managed to inhabit most of my life and will try to continue inhabiting for whatever remains of it.

I know which side of the wall I prefer and pray to stay on it or, is it, in it.

فَضْرِبْ بَيْنَهُمْ سُورًا بَابٌ بَاطِنٌ فِيهِ الرَّحْمَةُ وَظَاهِرٌ مِنْ قِبَلِ الْعَذَابِ

faḍuriba baynahum bi sūril-lahu bābun bāṭinuhu
fihi -r-rahmatu wa ḡhāhiruhu min qibalihi-l-ʿadhābā

And a wall will be erected between them with a gate in it,
on the inside of which there will be mercy, outside of it torment.
(Sūratu-l-Ḥadid 57:13)



noon hierographers
green mountain
virginia
usa